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ノート・資料

English Pronunciation: Intelligibility, Comprehensibility, and Accentedness

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Most English language learners in Japan today are taught General American (GA) English accents whereas in the 1950s and 1960s, Received Pronunciation (RP), also known as British English (BrE), was the target accent in Japanese English-language education. Even though there are many varieties of spoken first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) English, many schools teach the North American variety because North American English (NAE) pronunciation has gained a prominence in many areas of the world. It is the goal of many L2 learners to sound like native speakers (Derwing, 2003), whether for professional or fashionable purposes. Moreover, in a survey on a website for pronunciation by saundz (Students attitudes towards learning English, 2015) 85% of students said that if their pronunciation were native-like, they would be more confident of their English. In addition, according to research by Jung (2010, p. 149), many Korean people think that Koreans who speak with an American English accent “share a social prestige above those using a common Standard English.” A significant number of ambitious English as Second

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Language (ESL) learners and English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners strive to attain this native-like pronunciation because they feel that having a native-speaker accent will lead to better professional opportunities. Even though many English-language learners strive to attain a British or American English accent, intelligibility and comprehensibility should be the focus of English-language instruction rather than native-speaker accent proximity.

English as Lingua Franca (ELF)

English is the *lingua franca* of the world. Seidlhofer explains the concept of English as a *Lingua Franca* (ELF) as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (2011, p.7). In the current world, many non-native speakers are using English as a tool for communication. According to Crystal, 80% of English users are L2 speakers (1997). With English being a common international language, the medium of English is used for communicative purposes. Therefore, many of these English language speakers do not need an American English or British English accent when communicating with other L2 speakers of English.

Lingua Franca Core (LFC)

Not all English learners need to nor may not want to sound like British or American native speakers, though they want to communicate with other L1 and L2 English speakers. Jenkins (2000) took the international status of English into consideration and proposed that pronunciation error, deviation from non-standard native-speaker pronunciation, should be redefined and reclassified. Rather than deviation from native-speaker pronunciation, she argues that regional variation should be recognized as

a norm. Her research has become known as *lingua franca core* (LFC) with elements promoting international intelligibility, not necessarily native-speaker accents.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation can be defined as “the way a certain sound or sounds are produced. Unlike ARTICULATION, which refers to the actual production of speech sounds in the mouth, pronunciation stresses more the way sounds are perceived by the hearer” (Richards & Schimdt, 2010, p. 469). Thus, pronunciation includes not only speaker enunciation of sounds in a language but also listener perception of comprehensibility of those sounds.

For English language learners, “pronunciation” is more than language enunciation and perception. It also has social parameters with consequences. A native-like American English or British English pronunciation could mean employment or promotion. Often call centers, for example, hire people with or train them to speak with English native-speaker accents because English-speaking customers may feel more comfortable understanding the call center agents (Raghuram, 2013). In many positions for English language teachers, native speakers are often preferred (Ballard & Winke 2017). When looking at advertisements for English language schools and universities, academic institutions often promote themselves by stressing the number of native speakers of English they have (English Teaching Jobs Classified, 2017). Moreover, English-language speakers with accents perceived as non-native have been judged to be less honest than those accents perceived as native-speakers of English (Lev-Ari & Keisai, 2010). Thus, many English-language learners

believe that having a native-speaker accent is advantageous.

Accent

Every individual has an accent. Accent is defined as “a particular way of speaking which tells the listener something about the speaker’s background” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 3). It continues to explain that an accent may identify the speaker’s native country or region, social class, and whether or not the speaker is a native speaker of the language.

Accentedness, or a foreign accent, is the “extent to which an individual’s L2 speech differs from a particular variety of English” (Grant 2017, p. 10) and is perceived to distinguish speakers from different native-like communities (Derwing & Munro, 2005, 2015).

However, even though many learners strive for an American English accent, many L2 English speakers may prefer their non-native accents rather than American or British native speaker accents because their L2 accents reflect national identity or because of social-group peer pressure. For example, this researcher is aware of a Japanese student, who, returning to Japan after having lived in the United States, spoke with a native-speaker accent. After a few weeks, the student started to pronounce English with a Japanese accent in front of his university classmates, possibly to fit into his new group of friends. Researchers find it common that L2 speakers may not want to alienate themselves from their group (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner 2013) as it marks identity.

According to Trofimovich (2017), many language institutions overstress the teaching of native-like accents. He states that English L1 listeners can learn

to adapt to English L2 speakers' accents, and accents do not always make communication difficult.

Non-target language accents are unavoidable for many L2 speakers. Research (Grant, p.139) shows that few adult language learners who start learning the target language will acquire native-like accents.

For reasons given above, the goal to have students acquire native-sounding non-accented speech may be unnecessary. Students' focus should be on improving intelligibility and comprehensibility because communication is more important than native-like speech.

Intelligibility

Intelligibility is the focus on words and refers to listener comprehension of an utterance. Intelligibility includes pronunciation, stress, intonation, and vowel and consonant sounds. Derwing and Munro define it as "the extent to which a listener understands a speaker's message" (as cited in Grant p. 10). It is a two-way process because it involves both speakers' language production and listeners' comprehension ability. A listener's previous exposure to L2 speech or familiarity with the topic of discussion can affect the understanding of L2 speakers (Kennedy & Trofimovich 2008). For example, many professionals who teach English in Japan can usually understand students' English despite the Japanese-language accent. Also, for example, scientists who speak English as L1 or L2 may be more willing to attempt to understand what other L2 English speakers have to say because of a shared interest in that field knowledge.

Comprehensibility

Comprehensibility is the focus on meaning. Derwing and Munro (2015) defined *comprehensibility* as the perception of ease or difficulty a listener has in understanding a speaker. It is the listener's ability to understand the speaker's complete message, not every word. Comprehensibility includes grammar, phonology, fluency, and cultural sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects.

Why should intelligibility and comprehensibility be the focus rather than L2 accent reduction? By making intelligibility and comprehensibility goals for language learners, their L2 proficiency can improve. With motivation and effort, L2 speakers of English can improve communicating in English.

Teachers can try to promote successful comprehensible communication by having students practice both segmentals (consonant and vowels features) and suprasegmentals (word stress, rhythm, thought groups and pausing, connected speech, and intonation). Teachers should integrate pronunciation practice with communicative activities. Dickenson (2010) adds that segmental and suprasegmental systems should be taught together because the clarity of segmentals is related to the message. Derwing *et al.* (1998) also report that ESL learners who were taught prosody were able to improve their comprehensibility more than learners who received instruction targeting individual sounds.

Teachers should also use recasting, a corrective technique by modeling or giving the correct form to create explicit awareness in L2 learners. For example, a student may say "I speaked to him yesterday." and the teacher would say, "Oh, you spoke to him yesterday." Otherwise, with fossilization,

no improvement may occur. Derwing and Munro (2017, p. 43) explain that “...explicit corrective feedback is valuable.” Explicit correction also leads to defossilizing speech patterns which interfere with communication.

Teachers should not try to eradicate accents, and accents should be accepted unless they obstruct communication. Research results by Munro and Derwing (2014) show that L2 accent markedness does not reduce a listener’s comprehension of speech. Teachers should strive to make students’ speech functional, not “native-like.”

Language is used by participants to accomplish social processes in communication. In short, teachers should strive for intelligibility and comprehensibility without placing too much emphasis on making L2 learners sound like native speakers of English, so that they may communicate with people from different parts of the world more successfully.

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